

## **WHAT TO DO WHEN SOMEONE IN – OR CLOSE TO – YOUR CLASS DIES**

By Sandra Sutherland Fox

Death challenges the coping skills of children and adolescents and confronts most teachers with a situation for which they're ill prepared. The following suggestions may help you respond to such crises and prepare for future times of loss and grief in your classroom.

### **1. Share the fact of the death with children and parents.**

Tell the children what's happened, but share only the information that's public knowledge. Explain to younger students that a person dies when his body stops working. Call parents or send notes telling them what's happened and encouraging them to listen to their youngsters' reactions to the death and to talk with them about it. You might want to plan a PTA meeting so parents can learn together how to help children deal with death.

### **2. Recognize our own feelings.**

Particular events or anniversaries of losses in our own lives can make it difficult to talk with children about death. It's all right to tell youngsters how hard it is for you to talk about what's happened, and it's all right to cry. If your own grief makes it impossible for you to talk with the children, find someone who can. Stay in the classroom during the discussion, however, so you'll know which youngsters still have questions or concerns.

### **3. Watch particularly vulnerable children carefully.**

Identify children who may be "at risk" for later emotional problems as a result of the death – for example, close friends of a child who dies or children whose parents or siblings have illnesses similar to the one that caused the recent death. When someone's parent dies, all children worry about the mortality of their own parents. The death of a classmate raises similar fears, particularly if one has the same symptoms or has done the same things as the child who died. Remind children that most people live to be very, very old.

### **4. Address the children's fears and fantasies.**

Children's active imaginations sometimes lead them to think something they've done or not done has caused a death. Give them accurate information about the cause of the death. If a child has in any way been responsible for a death (such as challenging a friend to run across the street in front of a car or instigating play with a loaded gun), encourage his parents to seek immediate mental health services for him.

**5. Discuss issues specific to the situation.**

Encourage the children to talk about what happened to their friend or their friend's family. You may need to talk about why troubled adults hurt children, about specific illnesses, about drunk driving, or about suicide. It is perfectly acceptable to say, "I don't know" or "What do you think?" or "I'll try to find out more about that for you."

**6. Support children as they grieve.**

Grieving usually involves feelings of both sadness and anger. Recognize and accept both. Let boys, especially, know it is okay to cry. Children grieve differently – and longer – than most adults. They grieve the loss again whenever the person who died would have been present for special occasions. Young grieving children are often boisterous and mischievous, while grieving adolescents can exhibit antisocial behaviour – perhaps truancy or stealing.

**7. Remember the person who died.**

Talk with children about their memories of the person who died and about the feelings and needs of those who survive. If a classmate dies, youngsters will want to find a way to commemorate a life that was so tragically short. Encourage students to think about how they'll help a child whose parent, sibling, or other relative has died when he comes back to school.

**8. Establish or continue an ongoing death education program.**

Use "teachable moments" to explore ideas of death and dying and of life and living with your students. Take advantage of opportunities in literature, science, social studies, and other parts of the curriculum to discuss death at times when it is not a personal issue for your students.